Drasha/Sermon Parshas Ki Sisa "A Stiff-Necked People"

She has been called "arguably the most influential woman in the world" by The American Spectator. TIME magazine identified her as "one of the 100 people who most influenced the 20th Century." From 2004 to 2011, TIME named her "one of the most influential people" -- the only person in the world to have appeared in the latter's list on ten occasions. She has a net worth of more than three billion dollars, is the richest self-made woman in America, and has succeeded on many fronts.

Known as "The Queen of Talk, in 2004 she became the first black person to rank among the 50 most generous Americans. By 2012 she raised and had given away about $400 million to educational causes and personally donated millions of dollars to victims of poverty and disease.

Who am I referring to? By now I'm sure you know: Oprah Winfrey

Oprah is a household name, but it turns out that “Oprah” is not her real name. A little known fact about this exceptional woman is that her family wanted to give her a Biblical name, so they went with a name from the Book of Ruth -- Orpah.

So how did she get from Orpah to Oprah? Oprah explained:

"I was born (at home) ... in rural Mississippi in 1954. There were not a lot of educated people around ... My Aunt Ida had chosen the name, but nobody really knew how to spell it ... it went down as "Orpah" on my birth certificate, but people didn't know how to pronounce it, so they put the "P" before the "R" in every place else other than the birth certificate. On the birth certificate it is Orpah, but then it got translated to Oprah, so here we are. But that's great because Oprah spells Harpo backwards. I don't know what Orpah spells."

Everything happens for a reason. And it's probably better that Oprah became Oprah and not Orpah. Why? Because if you know something about who Orpah was and what the name means, you'll understand that it's not the best name -- Biblical or otherwise -- that Aunt Ida could have picked for her young niece.

Orpah is one of the secondary characters of the Book of Ruth. Like her sister-in-law Ruth, Orpah initially wanted to accompany Naomi and return with her to her land; but, unlike Ruth, Orpah finally accepted her mother-in-law’s arguments and went back to Moab. Orpah was a daughter of Eglon, king of Moab. Why was she called Orpah? What does the name Orpah mean?

She was called Orpah because she turned her back (oref, "nape of the neck") on her mother-in-law. It would be inaccurate to say that Orpah was wicked; however, not only did Orpah turn her back on Naomi and miss out on the chance to become Jewish, but Orpah is identified as the great-grand mother of four really big boys -- four Philistinian giants -- of whom one was Goliath, who met Ruth's great-grandson David on a battlefield.

Interesting stories, to be sure. What does this discussion of Orpah and Oprah have to do with this week's parsha?

In the tragic incident of the Golden Calf, Hashem said to Moshe: I see this is a stiff necked people (am kashe oref). Now let Me be, that my anger may blaze forth against them and that I may destroy them... (Exodus, 32: 9, 10)

Am kashe-oref -- a people who are stiff necked. Hashem tells Moshe that He is going to destroy the Jewish people because they have a stiff 'oref' (from which 'Orpah' comes) -- neck.

There are many similes for 'stubborn.' We refer to obstinate people as being stubborn as a mule, goat, bull, or ox. Victor Hugo wrote of someone 'stubborn as a stone.' Shakespeare wrote, 'more stubborn-hard than hammer’d iron.' After the sin of the Golden Calf, G-d tells Moses that He is going to destroy the Jewish people -- not because of what they did, but because they are “a stiff-necked people.” Hashem's anger is sparked not by the actions, but by the character trait that caused the actions. What's so bad about being 'stiff-necked'?

A stiff-necked, stubborn person is unwilling to listen and unwilling to change.

In a daily prayer (tachnun) we say, "Elokaynu, ....sh'ain anu az'ay panim u'kshe oref, lomar lefenache 'tzadikim anachnu v'lo chatanu' " Our G-d, we are not brazen and stiff-necked to say before You, 'we are righteous and have not sinned' " The stiff-necked person says, "I didn't do anything wrong! I'm a tzadik! I didn't sin, and I don't sin!" Being unwilling to listen and change has many ramifications, as the following story illustrates:

After delivering a lecture on the solar system, philosopher-psychologist William James was approached by an elderly lady who claimed she had a theory superior to the one described by him.

"We don't live on a ball rotating around the sun," she said. "We live on a crust of earth on the back of a giant turtle."

Not wishing to demolish this absurd argument with the ample scientific evidence at his command, James decided to dissuade his opponent gently.

"If your theory is correct madam, what does this turtle stand on?"

"You're a very clever man, Mr. James, and that's a good question, but I can answer that. The first turtle stands on the back of a second, far larger, turtle."

"But what does this second turtle stand on?" James asked patiently.

The old lady crowed triumphantly, "It's no use, Mr. James -- it's turtles all the way down!"

A deeper level of understanding the problem of being stiff-necked is explained by the masters of Kabbalah.

The letters of the Hebrew word Paro (Pharaoh), when rearranged, spells the word ha’oref, which means the back; or more precisely, the nape of the neck. The nape of the neck and the face represent two diametrically opposite physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual dynamics.

The face -- in Hebrew, panim -- expresses one’s inner feelings. When we look at the face of another person we can tell if the person is happy or sad, pleased or angry. Consonant with the expression, “It’s written all over his face,” when a person shows you their face they are inviting you into their inner space.

It is interesting to note that in English language the word face connotes the surface or outward appearance of something, such as in the expression, “at face value." In Hebrew, however, the word for face, panim, is synonymous with the word pnimiyut, which denotes inwardness. When a person shows you their face, they are communicating with you. And often it is a more profound communication than what occurs through words.

By contrast, when one has their back towards us we know virtually nothing about their personality, attitude, frame of mind or disposition. Standing with one’s back towards another expresses the most superficial and external connection that they may have with the other.

An "oref personality" can be dangerous. A person who has nothing internal to offer will simply try to show their power. Having no sense of self worth, they bully others to give themselves some measure of security. Pharaoh, the ultimate personification of the oref personality, becomes the bully and tyrant who exclaims, “The River is mine and I have made myself.” He is a self proclaimed g-d!

But being stiff-necked can be positive.

The Midrash teaches there are three categories where excessive chutzpah is found: The most chutzpah found among animals is in the dog. Among birds, the rooster. And the greatest chutzpah among the nations of the world is found among .... the Jews. But the Midrash concludes: If you think this statement is negative, you're wrong.

The term "stubborn refusal" is generally used negatively. For example, it is used when someone refuses to acknowledge blatantly obvious facts. But the same expression is also used to describe the refusal to give into peer pressure which encourages you to engage in unethical or unwise behavior.

Stephen Covey makes the following observation about healthy "stubborn refusal" in his book The 8th Habit,

"I learned the doctrine of stubborn refusal from interacting with naval officers. It means that when you know something is wrong and that it would result in serious consequences to the overall mission and values of the organization, then you should respectfully push back, no matter what your position or rank. You should speak up and declare yourself in opposition to the momentum of a growing decision that you are absolutely convinced is dead wrong. That's essentially living from your conscience - allowing your inner voice or light to guide your actions rather than giving in to the sway of peer pressure." (p. 259)

Moses used the trait of being stiff-necked to advocate for the Jewish people.

And Moses hastened, bowed his head to the ground and prostrated himself,and said: "If I have now found favor in Your eyes, O Lord, let the Lord go now in our midst [even] if they are a stiff-necked people, and You shall forgive our iniquity and our sin and thus secure us as Your possession." (Exodus 34:8,9)

What kind of a defense attorney was Moses being for the Jewish people? The very thing that upsets the Judge -- being stiff-necked -- is what 'Moses the lawyer' says should spur Him to show favor?

Moses was saying that the quality that causes G-d to want to destroy us is the same quality that will save us. Being stiff-necked means being stubborn. Stubborn people are the least likely to change or admit a mistake. They don't listen. They know what they know and they're going to do whatever they please because of it.

But Moses understood the flip side to stubbornness: Once a stubborn person's loyalty is gained, he is loyal forever.

The Jewish people, the most stubborn of nations, stayed true to Hashem throughout history. We didn't accept false messiahs. We didn't accept distortions of Hashem's words. Throughout history, we died with the words ani ma'amin and Shema Yisrael on our lips, rather than abandon our relationship with G-d.

Other nations of the world changed their religious affiliation as soon as they were conquered. But the stubborn nation of Israel always resisted the sword, the Cross and the Crescent, always remaining faithful to Hashem. Moses understood that someone who is tough to convince can be a real pain, but once convinced, will solidly stand by you. "You have to stand by us," Moses tells G-d, "because no other nation will stand by You in the way that we will."

Our worst quality -- being stiff-necked -- is also our greatest strength.

I'll conclude with a final story.

A man was wanting the phone number for the publication, "Theatre Arts", so he called Information. The operator came on the line and said, "Information, may I Help you?"

He answered, "Yes ma'am. I'd like to know the phone number for 'Theatre Arts'."

There was a pause and the operator said, "I'm sorry. We have no listing for a Theodore Artz."

"No ma'am, you don't understand. I want a listing for the publication, 'Theatre Arts'."

After a brief pause she said, "Sir, I just told you, there IS no such listing for Theodore Artz."

By this time, the man's patience was running out. He raised his voice and said, "Ma'am! I need you to hear me, the publication is 'Theatre Arts', T-H-E-A-T-R-E!"

There was a lengthy pause on the other end of the line. Then with crushing finality, the operator answered in an even voice, "Sir, that is NOT how you spell Theodore."

When Oprah Winfrey was four-years-old, she stood on the screened-in porch of her grandmother's small farm. She watched her grandmother, Hattie Mae Lee, stir a big black pot of boiling clothes. Hattie Mae couldn't afford an electric washing machine. Instead, she cleaned her family's dirty clothes in boiling water.

"I remember thinking, 'My life won't be like this,' "said Oprah. "It will be better."

Perhaps it was a blessing in disguise that she was given the name Orpah but came to be called Oprah. She grew up with just enough of a kashe-oref, a stiff-neck, to not simply survive her impoverished upbringing, but to become an Oscar-nominated actress, magazine editor, literary ring leader, a radio host and network owner, philanthropist, and one of the most influential women of our generation.

Is the trait of being stiff-necked a good thing? It all depends upon how you use it.